

ECONOMIC AND MEDIA WAR AGAINST SOCIALIST SOCIETIES: THE CASE OF US–CUBAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

This article examines the US's use of sanctions or unilateral coercive measures (economic war) and the US's support for propaganda communicated through its own organised mass media and the supposedly "independent," corporate mass media as well as through social media to instigate anti-government sentiment and action (media war). The US's economic war against Cuba began soon after Cuba's 1959 revolution, although the US's hostile actions as well as desires and efforts to shape Cuban society go back to the 19th century. This economic war has had tremendous negative impact on Cuba's economy and the daily life of Cubans. In terms of the media war, this article focuses on how propaganda distributed through mass, corporate media as well as social media, often paid for by the US government, was directed at misleading Cubans and others, including those in the US, about the situation in Cuba. Such distortions were

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designed to provoke alienation and anti-government action by Cubans in general and, in more recent years, particular subgroups of artists, musicians, Afro-Cubans, and youth. And while some successes can be noted (specifically the sparking and broadcasting of protests on 11 July 2021), more generally the media war has failed in its goal of regime change. The non-event of 15 November 2021 is a clear example of this.

Key words: Cuba, sanctions, economic war, media, media war, blockade

Introduction

Peace educators generally agree that peace is a broader concept than the absence of war. They recognise that there are other forms of violence besides macro-level physical or direct violence (e.g. international military engagement), such as micro-level physical violence (i.e. beating of spouses or individuals who are different in terms of race ethnicity or sexual orientation) and macro-level structural or indirect violence (i.e. governmental or other institutional policies and practices that within a given society create or perpetuate illiteracy, poverty, ill health, shortened life span and environmental degradation) (e.g. see Brock-Utne 1985; Reardon 1988). What has less often been highlighted is how at the international level countries can engage in structural violence.

In this article I will examine the use of structural violence in US–Cuba relations, specifically looking at the US’s use of sanctions or unilateral coercive measures (economic warfare) and the US’s support for propaganda communicated through its own organised mass media and the supposedly “independent,” corporate mass media as well as through social media to instigate anti-government sentiment and action (media war).² One could also discuss these phenomena in relation to US actions toward other “socialist” countries in Latin America, Nicaragua (e.g. Goett 2019) and Venezuela (e.g. Emersberger and Podur 2021; Vaz 2022), but the case of Cuba as an example of 21st-century socialism (Ginsburg 2021) will suffice for purposes here, because of the 60+-year history of US government hostile actions toward Cuba. As Bolender (2010: 3) observes, the United States “continues to hold Cuba up for special punishment. The travel restrictions, the economic blockade, the propaganda war and the

2 Pasqualina (2021) labels this a “multidimensional war against Cuba”, in which she also includes the diplomatic dimension, mentioning how the US has used the Organization of American States to delegitimize the Cuban Revolution (see also Díaz-Canel 2022). Our focus here, of course, does not include another dimension of the US’s hostile actions towards Cuba – the US military base in Cuba’s Guantánamo province and its “controversial detainment facility ... that U.N. experts and other analysts want shuttered immediately” (O’Connor 2022).

terrorist acts³ have persisted against this small island nation” (see also Bolender 2019; de los Santos & Prashad 2021a; Pérez 2015).⁴

Lamrani (2013: 74) reports that, since Cuba’s revolution in 1959:

The diplomatic rhetoric used to justify US hostility toward Cuba has changed over time. Initially, nationalization and compensation constituted the bone of

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- 3 Bolender (2010: 1–2) observes that “for half a century the Cuban people have endured almost every conceivable form of terrorism. The bombs that have destroyed department stores, hotel lobbies, theaters, famous restaurants and bars ... The second worst act of air terrorism in the Americas [in 1976], resulting in the deaths of 73 civilians. An exploding ship in Havana Harbor [French freighter, *La Coubre*, in 1960], killing and injuring hundreds. Attacks on defenseless villages. Teenagers tortured and murdered for teaching farmers to read and write [during the Literacy Campaign in 1961]. Biological terrorism causing the deaths of more than 100 children. The psychological horror that drove thousands of parents to willingly send their children to an unknown fate in a foreign country [i.e., Operation Peter Pan, through which 14,000 Cuban children were sent to the US, due to fear instigated by the Catholic Church that the Cuban revolutionary government would take their kids away]. ... The accused have been primarily Cuban American counter-revolutionaries – many allegedly trained, financed and supported by various American government agencies. ... The [Cuban] government has documented approximately 800 terrorist acts inside Cuba since 1960 – hundreds more have occurred against officials and commercial operations outside the country. ... The personal toll has been calculated at 3,478 dead and 2,099 injured” (see also de los Santos & Prashad 2021b). Furthermore, Bolender (2010: 14) notes that Cuba’s legitimate and necessary responses to “these terrorists” would be seen “as paranoia, totalitarian and evidence of the repressiveness of Fidel’s regime”.
 - 4 Pérez (2019) argues that the US’s relationship with Cuba “is a complex matter. The subject of Cuba has rarely been a topic of reasoned disquisition. It defies facile explanation, and certainly cannot be understood solely – or even principally – within the logic of the policy calculus that otherwise serves to inform US foreign relations, mostly because it is not logical.” And Chomsky (2010: viii–ix) comments that “perhaps the most striking feature of Washington’s war against Cuba since it dared to liberate itself at last in 1959 has been the frenzy with which it has been waged. ... Robert Kennedy, who was assigned the task of coordinating the massive campaign of state-directed international terrorism, repeatedly declared that overthrowing the government of Cuba was ‘the top priority of the United States Government – all else is secondary – no time, money, effort, or manpower is to be spared.’ ... The terrorist war against Cuba peaked again in the late 1970s. [Ironically, in the 1980s,] the Reagan administration ... add[ed] Cuba to the list of states that sponsor terror.”

contention.⁵ Subsequently, it was Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union that became the main obstacle to normalizing relations between the two countries. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, it was Cuban intervention in Africa, specifically in Angola and Namibia, actions undertaken to help national liberation movements gain independence and to fight against apartheid in South Africa, that aroused the ire of Washington. Finally, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington has flaunted the argument of democracy and human rights⁶ in order to maintain its economic stranglehold over the Cuban nation. (See also LeoGrande 2022)

Bolender (2010: 3) mentions that from "the earliest days of Fidel [Castro Ruz]'s victory, America has obsessed over this relatively insignificant third-world country, determined to eliminate the radically different social-economic order instituted by the revolution."⁷ However, as Chomsky (2010: xv–xvii) explains in the introduction to Bolender's book:

the 50-year crusade to overthrow the Cuban government has deep historical roots.⁸ The great grand strategist John Quincy Adams [1767–1848], the intellectual author of the Monroe Doctrine, wrote that "the annexation of Cuba to our federal republic will be indispensable to the continuance and integrity of the Union itself." ... Adams

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- 5 Importantly, Bolender (2012: 133–4) explains that "the State Department reports 5,911 Americans lost \$1.9 billion to the nationalization programs since the 1960s, conveniently neglecting to acknowledge every Cuban effort to negotiate compensation ... [Furthermore,] US companies placed nationalized properties as losses and have long ago deducted the full value from corporate taxes, beyond what they would have received in compensation."
 - 6 The US government's ongoing critique of Cuba in terms of democracy and human rights (see Hackwell & Jrapko 2021; Tablada 2022) is ironic given that "The US has fallen to a new low in a global ranking of political rights and civil liberties, a drop fueled by unequal treatment of minority groups, damaging influence of money in politics, and increased polarization, according to a new report by Freedom House, a democracy watchdog group" (Levine 2021; see also Freedom House 2021: 10).
 - 7 Bolender (2010: 11) subsequently notes that "after failing to orient Fidel [Castro Ruz] towards maintaining American primacy, the decision was made to do away with him and his regime. When the revolution was declared to be socialist following the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, the matter to cleanse Cuba of this disease was never further questioned."
 - 8 Similarly, Lamrani (2013: 74) argues that "to grasp Washington's real purpose in its relations with Cuba, it is necessary to go back to the nineteenth century and heed the warnings of José Martí, apostle and national hero, who warned the peoples of Latin America against a 'convulsed and brutal North,' a North that aspired to annex the Caribbean island and dominate the continent."

understood that the indispensable conquest of Cuba would have to wait. The British were a powerful deterrent, just as they blocked repeated efforts to conquer Canada. But Adams wisely observed that as US power increased, and Britain's declined, the deterrent would vanish and Cuba would fall into Washington's hands by "the laws of political gravitation," as an apple falls from a tree. By 1898 the laws of political gravitation had worked their magic, and the US was able to carry out the military operation known as "the liberation of Cuba," in reality the intervention to prevent Cuba from liberating itself from Spanish rule, converting it to ... a "virtual colony" of the US. (See also Bolender 2010: 5–6; Pérez 2019)⁹

We will now turn to examining in more detail the US's economic war and media war targeting Cuba. Nevertheless, we should note, as recently did Carlos Fernández de Cossío, head of the Cuban Foreign Ministry's Department for US Affairs, that "for more than six decades, ... despite the enormous resources devoted to trying to overturn Cuba's revolutionary government and reestablish capitalist property relations, the US rulers have failed in that goal" (quoted in Koppel et al. 2021).

Economic War: Sanctions or Unilateral Coercive Measures

Since Cuba's 1959 Revolution, US policies toward Cuba have been based on the idea first articulated by Lestor Mallory, who in April 1960 wrote a US State Department memo proposing that "every possible means should be undertaken ... to weaken the economic life of Cuba ... [by] denying money and supplies to Cuba ... [in order] to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government" (Mallory 1960).¹⁰ This idea produced within the Eisenhower

9 Bolender (2010: 8) notes additionally that "The [Platt] amendment[, which Cubans were coerced into incorporating into their 1903 Constitution,] gave the Americans control of foreign policy, the right to intervene in national affairs, permission for private businesses to come in and invest in Cuba at favorable conditions and the authorization to purchase land [including "coaling station" at Guantánamo] at less than market value".

10 In addition to the overt economic war (i.e. sanctions), the US also pursued covert actions targeting the Cuban economy: As Pérez (2015) explains: "Four key sectors of the Cuban economy were targeted: electric power facilities, including the destruction of electric generating plants; petroleum refineries, storage facilities, and tankers; railroad and transportation systems, including bridges, railroad tracks, and rolling stock as well as port, shipping, and maritime facilities; and production and manufacturing sectors, including the industrial facilities, sugar cane fields and mills, and communication systems."

Administration just over a year after Cuba's Revolution appears to be one of the inspirations for President Kennedy's executive order in February 1962 (Chomsky 2010: x).¹¹ The executive order stated in part that:

[T]he United States ... is prepared to take all necessary actions to promote national and hemispheric security by isolating the present Government of Cuba ... Now, therefore, I, John F. Kennedy, President of the United States of America ...
 1. Hereby proclaim an embargo upon trade between the United States and Cuba ...
 2. Hereby prohibit ... the importation into the United States of all goods of Cuban origin and all goods imported through Cuba.¹²

And LeoGrande (2022) reminds us that "a year later [Kennedy] invoked the [1917] Trading with the Enemy Act to extend the embargo to prohibit all transactions (trade, travel, and financial) unless licensed by the Secretary of the Treasury (at the president's direction)." The evolving set of economic sanctions or, more appropriately, unilateral coercive measures,¹³ by the US against Cuba has been authorised by executive orders as well as federal laws (e.g. the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992,¹⁴ the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity

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- 11 Pertierra (2022) reports that "President Kennedy was a fan of Cuban cigars [and] in early February 1962, he commissioned his assistant Pierre Salinger to buy 1,200 cigars. The next day [when] Kennedy had that treasure in his hands, ... he took out his pen and signed the first version of the US blockade against Cuba."
- 12 Chomsky (2010: x) provides an insight into the scope of US resources devoted to monitoring and enforcing the embargo (or blockade): "The Treasury Department, reporting to Congress in April 2004 on the activities of its Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), [stated] 'that of its 120 employees, four were assigned to tracking the finances of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, while almost two dozen were occupied with enforcing the embargo against Cuba'" (see also Lamrani 2013: 14).
- 13 Arguably, the term sanctions should be used only for actions undertaken by the United Nations. In the case of US economic warfare against Cuba, these policies and actions are undertaken unilaterally by the US, although the US seeks to extend extraterritorially its policies to restrict actions by individuals, organizations and corporations based in other countries (Bolender 2013; Lamrani 2013; Yaffe 2021). Moreover, LeoGrande (2022) reminds us that "in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson pressured the OAS [Organization of American States] into formally adopting a commercial and diplomatic embargo against Cuba, which lasted until the mid-1970s". This is why Regalado (2022: 12) refers to it as "the genocidal, unilateral, and extra-territorial blockade imposed by the United States".
- 14 LeoGrande (2022) explains that the 1992 Cuban Democracy (Torricelli) Act instantiates the extraterritorial nature of the blockade in that it "prohibits trade between the subsidiaries of US companies abroad and Cuba".

Act of 1996,¹⁵ the Trade Sanction Reform and Export Enhancement Act of 2000), but derive authority from the Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917 (Flowers 2021; Kornbluh 2022; Kornbluh & Gelzer 2022; Lamrani 2013).¹⁶ As noted above, Kennedy's initial executive order proclaims "an embargo upon trade between the United States and Cuba,"¹⁷ but has also been used to limit travel to Cuba by US citizens (i.e. by restricting their spending money when in Cuba). However, the embargo (or blockade), including the 243 measures implemented by the Trump Administration, is viewed as violating international law and has been condemned by the vast majority of countries at the UN 30 times, in part because it is unilaterally imposed by the US and because it has been used extraterritorially to restrict banking and other business activities of individuals, organisations and companies based in other countries (Bolender 2013; Cabañas 2022; Telesur Staff 2021b; Yaffe 2021).¹⁸ Moreover, "a significant majority of the US population would like to see the economic sanctions lifted and relations with Cuba normalized" (Lamrani 2013: 14).

The impact on Cuba and its people has been extensive (Banks 2021). For example, Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cuba, in his presentation to the United Nations General Assembly regarding the resolution entitled "Necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba", on 23 June 2021, commented:

In 2020, Cuba, like the rest of the world, had to face the extraordinary challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The US government has made the virus an ally

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- 15 LeoGrande (2022) highlights that the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Helm-Burton) Act "inscribed the embargo into law"; previously the embargo or blockade had been authorized – and could be changed or revoked – by executive order.
 - 16 Nahem (2022) reminds us that the 1992 and 1996 Acts were passed by Congress and signed by then President Clinton "during a severe economic contraction following the collapse of the Soviet Union".
 - 17 According to the regulations of the blockade, Cubans are prohibited to import any items that were produced in the US or contain at least 10 percent components that are US products (Yaffe 2020).
 - 18 As explained by LeoGrande (2022), the embargo or blockade can be seen to violate "the UN Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention and Interference in the Internal Affairs of States ..., [which] recognizes 'the sovereign and inalienable right of a State freely to determine its own political, economic, cultural and social systems,' and imposes on all states the duty 'to refrain from any action or attempt in whatever form or under whatever pretext to destabilize or to undermine the stability of another State.'"

in its ruthless unconventional warfare, deliberately and opportunistically increased the economic, commercial, and financial blockade, and caused the country record losses of about \$5 billion.

President Donald Trump has applied 243 unilateral coercive measures to limit the arrival of US travelers and harm tourist markets in third countries, he has taken wartime measures to deprive us of our fuel supplies, he has hunted down the health services that Cuba lends in many countries, it has intensified the harassment of our country's commercial and financial transactions with other countries, and has ... activat[ed] Title III of the [1996] Helms-Burton Act,¹⁹ to intimidate foreign investors and commercial enterprises. ...

The US authorities have cynically tried to spread certain ideas: ... that coercive measures do not affect the Cuban people ... Let's look at the numbers. From April 2019 to December 2020, the blockade caused damages calculated at [US]\$9,157,000,000, at current prices of this currency, or, on average, \$436 million per month. Over the past five years, Cuba's shortfall in this regard has exceeded \$17 billion. The cumulative damage during these six decades amounts to \$147,853,000,000 at current prices of this currency and \$1,377 billion at the price of gold. (See also Garcia & Maranges 2021b; Pérez 2021.)²⁰

19 Title III of the Helms-Burton (Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act) of 1996 "gives US citizens, including naturalized Cuban Americans, the right to sue in federal court anyone, in the United States or abroad, who is 'trafficking in' (benefiting from) nationalized property, and blocks the officers of foreign trafficking companies from entering the United States" (LeoGrande 2022). One example of the use of Title III is provided by Gámez Torrez (2022): "In a consequential ruling Monday night [21 March 2022], a Miami federal judge said four major cruise lines with South Florida ties – Carnival, Norwegian, Royal Caribbean and MSC Cruises – engaged in "prohibited tourism" and "trafficking activities" by carrying passengers to Cuba and profiting from the use of Havana port facilities confiscated by the Fidel Castro-led government, the first decision of its kind that could affect similar lawsuits."

20 "The political realities at play as to how America treats China when compared to Cuba were clarified in 2000 shortly after the United States granted normal trade relations with the emerging economic powerhouse. During the discussions in Congress, House majority leader Richard Armey, a Texas Republican, made the observation that "free and open trade is not only the best way to make China a free and open nation, but it may be the only way. A market is simply an arena in which there is a sharing of information about market transactions, information about desires, wants, hopes and dreams, and economic conditions. But, Mr. Speaker, one cannot share that information about economics without also sharing information about culture, politics, religion and values. Information, Mr. Speaker, is the life blood of a market.

The following excerpts from various authors' publications illustrate the impact of the US blockade on Cuba and its people:

The blockade has cost the island \$900 billion, comprising of hundreds of tallies such as the \$80-million-plus owed Cuba by AT&T. Officials estimate the island's per capita GDP would be roughly double if the siege [i.e. blockade] was lifted, increasing its ranking from 109th to 63rd in the world. More symbolically, the courts have taken up the blockades financial battle – Cuban magistrates in 2000 ordered the United States pay \$121 billion in damages ... (Bolender 2012: 134)

Cuba's ability to conduct normal business practices through the internationally connected banking systems is under threat. ... [For example,] the Bank of Nova Scotia reportedly backed off loaning to Canadians wanting to invest in Cuba. ... [Additionally,] Cuba is forced to pay high interest rates of up to 9 percent to the few banks that are willing to extend credit. (Bolender 2012: 149)

In 2020, the Department of Transportation denied two US cargo flights scheduled to deliver humanitarian aid to Cuba – including food, medicine and medical supplies – because it was not “in the foreign policy interests of the United States.” (ACERE 2021a)

In the book “A Sacred Oath” published in early May [2022], Mark Esper, who served as US Secretary of Defense during President Donald Trump administration (2017–2021), made revelations about the US policy of aggression towards Venezuela and Cuba. ... The former Secretary's book reveals that, during a meeting with all the heads of the US intelligence community held in March 2020, the Trump administration was willing to suffocate the Cuban and Venezuelan economies through a total maritime blockade ... As an alternative to the total military blockade, however, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien proposed to stop and confiscate all ships carrying Venezuelan oil to Cuba. (Telesur Staff 2022)

It is also poison to dictators, because dictators know that it is the truth that will set one free.” When it was suggested that strategy might as well apply to the Caribbean nation, Republican whip Tom Delay responded with a strong defence of the embargo: “(It) has not worked the way it should have worked because we have not been turning the screws on him (Castro) and screwing him down and putting pressure on him, so that his people will rise up and throw him out. After all, Cuba is not Eastern Europe, this is not the Soviet Union, this is a tiny island.” (Bolender 2012: 143–4).

President Trump severely restricted the possibility for most Cuban Americans to send remittances to family members in Cuba, a significant source of income for many Cubans. In 2018, remittances totaled \$3.7 billion. By adding FINCIMEX, a Cuban financial institution, to the Restricted List, international remittance services, including Western Union, halted all services to Cuba. (ACERE 2021a)

In March 2020, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food said that sanctions against Cuba “severely undermine ordinary [Cuban] citizens’ fundamental right to sufficient and adequate food” and that “it is now a matter of humanitarian and practical urgency to lift unilateral economic sanctions immediately.” (ACERE 2021a; see also DePalma 2022)

The embargo currently affects the ability of Cuban citizens and tourists, including US citizens or residents, to access nearly 50 platforms, websites and social media applications. These sites include broadly accessed ones like Zoom, Snapchat and at least 20 Google platforms. (ACERE 2021a)

Imagine a country developing and producing its own Covid-19 vaccines, enough to cover its entire population, but being unable to inoculate everyone because of a syringe shortage. ... Because of the 60-year US embargo, which punishes civilians during a pandemic, the country is facing a shortage of millions of syringes.²¹ (Glover 2021)

Today, Cuba is gradually returning to a level of normality, thanks to [its] vaccination campaign, which inoculated 90% of the population in record time. But this normality will not be the same as that experienced by most countries in the world because the shadow of the economic blockade hovers above all of [its] endeavors and interactions with the world and does not allow [Cubans] to live our lives to the fullest, especially the youngest. But [Cubans] are resilient people and [they] know the vast majority of the people of the world stand with [them], not with the barbarity of the blockade where cracks are appearing. [Cubans] will prevail. (Garcia 2022a)

21 Through the efforts of the US-based Saving Lives Campaign six million syringes were purchased and sent to Cuba, with the organizational assistance of Global Health Partners and Global Links (<https://ghpartners.org/syringes4cuba/>). Cuba also benefited from similar campaigns undertaken in Canada, the United Kingdom and other countries around the world.

Examples of the extraterritorial impact of the US's unilateral coercive measures are described in the quotes below:

Canadian citizen James Sabzali, while living in the United States, faced a 12-month conditional sentence and a fine of \$10,000 for selling resins used to purify water. French shipping company CMA CGM was penalized \$370,000 when its subsidiary in Norfolk, Virginia, accepted payment for facilitating cargo services to the island. OFAC even took on the United Nations, seizing \$4 million from the Foundation Fund for Cuba's fight against AIDS and tuberculosis during the first quarter of 2011 ... (Bolender 2012: 149)

In 2011 [PayPal] closed down the account of the German firm Rum & Co. for selling habanos cigars, rum and other products of Cuban origin through its website. Two years later, also in Germany, PayPal blocked the rock group COR's account, from which they had launched an internet campaign for donations to go on tour in Cuba. ... [And] in January 2015, two Canadian accounts were frozen for having been used to pay for a trip to Cuba ... for the marriage of two gardeners from Alberta who came to the island to learn about urban agriculture. (On Cuba Staff 2016)

Calls by the United States to other countries to refuse medical brigades of Cuban doctors impeded Cuba's COVID-19 global response, as well as interfered with an important source of income for the country that had helped to offset the impact of sanctions, as noted by a United Nations independent expert. (ACERE 2021a)²²

United Nations Special Rapporteur ... condemn[ed] the US embargo against Cuba, noting in particular that Swiss companies could not ship medical equipment to Cuba after being acquired by a US company, nor could Swiss humanitarian organizations transfer money for medical collaborations and support in Cuba as a result of the extraterritorial application of the embargo. (ACERE 2021a)

Progressive International recently asked for contributions so they can send a delegation to Havana next week to promote Cuba's effort to vaccinate the world against Covid-19. But in an apparent genuflection to the illegal US embargo against the island, Dutch multinational bank ING has blocked all donations supporting the trip, the group said Tuesday. (Stancil 2022)

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- 22 Carlos Fernández de Cossío, head of the Cuban Foreign Ministry's Department for US Affairs, commented on how the US misrepresents Cuba's engagement in internationalist medical cooperation. "Our doctors serving in other countries are labeled 'slaves.' The Cuban government's solidarity – the imperialists call it 'human trafficking' ... 'The US State Department has sent its representatives to pressure other governments that legitimately request Cuban medical assistance, demanding they not accept it'" (quoted in Koppel et al. 2021).

Media War: Propaganda via Mass Media and Social Media

In this section we will first discuss US efforts to fund and organise broadcast media operations. Then we focus on the anti-Cuban role of the so-called “independent” corporate media (newspapers and television). Finally, we examine efforts to employ social media platforms to transmit messages to try to convince those living in Cuba to criticise, reject and perhaps revolt against their revolutionary government.

Radio Swan and Radio & TV Martí

For almost 40 years, the US has underwritten the costs and helped to organise two media outlets, Radio and TV Martí. However, this effort is not the first or only one by the US government to broadcast propaganda to Cuba. For instance, Radio Cuba Libre or what came to be known as Radio Swan²³ was initiated in the early 1960s. The concept was discussed during a meeting that took place on 17 April 1960, a little over a year after Cuba’s 1959 revolution and one year before the ill-fated Bay of Pigs mercenary invasion. At this meeting David A. Phillips was briefing CIA Director of Plans, Richard Bissel, who headed the operations to overthrow the Cuban revolution, about how he would carry out his assignment, including the creation of Radio Cuba Libre (Free Cuba): “I intend to organize exile groups of women, workers, professionals, and students to act as propaganda fronts. I would support a number of exile publications. Radio broadcasts and, eventually, leaflet drops would be the vital operations” (quoted in Rodríguez 2009: 53). Rodríguez (2009: 53) also notes that “for a year, [Phillips] worked with a team of propaganda experts, eighteen hours a day ... All resources he requested had been granted; millions of dollars had been provided to pay hundreds of journalists, writers, technicians, radio announcers, and editors.”

With regard to Radio Martí,²⁴ this station began broadcasting news and entertainment in May 1985 during the Reagan Administration, originally from

23 The radio’s name stems from the place selected for broadcasting, starting on 17 May 1960: “Swan Island in the Gulf of Honduras, located ninety-seven miles north of Punta Patuca in Honduras” (Rodríguez 2009: 53).

24 Trainor (2015) indicates that the idea of Radio and TV Martí “did not go over well with the Cuban government. For one thing, the name: the 19th-century writer and independence leader José Martí was arguably Cuba’s most revered hero. ... [Fidel Castro Ruiz, for example,] was very offended by the name ‘Martí.’ He felt that it was defiling the name of the Cuban national hero. Cuba, as a result, has tried to block the signal over the years and has made it illegal for anyone to listen to it.”

Washington, DC, but subsequently from Miami, Florida. “Radio Martí still broadcasts 24 hours, seven days a week. Its studios, along with TV Martí’s, are in Doral surrounded by prison-like security that includes barbed wire and a security checkpoint. Its broadcasts are sent down to a transmitter in the Keys which then beams them across the Florida Straits” (Trainor 2015). With respect to TV Martí, it initiated its broadcasts on 27 March 1990, “beaming daily programs in Spanish via a transmitter affixed to an aerostat balloon – nicknamed “Fat Albert” by people in the area – tethered 10,000 feet (3,048 meters) above Cudjoe Key, Florida” (Walsh 2012: 116). After the aerostat’s destruction by Hurricane Dennis, TV Martí in October 2006 began to use fixed-wing aircraft to transmit its signals” (Fahrenheit 2013).

Radio and TV Martí are organised under the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which is now incorporated into the US Agency for Global Media (Bolender 2019: 5). Over the years the US government has spent \$1 billion to fund Radio Martí and TV Martí in a largely unsuccessful attempt to transmit propaganda to Cuba (Macleod 2021b). According to ACERE (2021a):

Every year the US ... spends about \$28 million for the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which runs Radio & TV Martí, and has 117 employees. These stations, which are barely heard in Cuba because of [Cuban] government blocking, have become merely a cash cow for its managers and staff in Florida. (See also Bolender 2019: 136)

As noted above, the listening and viewing audiences are very limited. For instance, Fahrenheit (2013) reported that the US government telephone surveys in 1990, 2003, 2006, and 2008 reported Cuban viewership of TV Martí of less than 1 percent.

“Independent” Mass Media

In his book, *Manufacturing the Enemy: The Media War Against Cuba*, Bolender (2019: 1–3) discusses how the US-based, “independent,”²⁵ corporate media (newspapers and television)

has enthusiastically endorsed the [US] government’s counter-revolutionary objectives to end Cuba’s socialist experiment and force the country to return into

25 “When it comes to Cuba, it’s the perfect convergence of propaganda – US strategy has been counter-revolutionary since the beginning, the press has supported that policy based on political and economic ideology, and the public has little chance to challenge those perceptions as travel restrictions prohibiting most Americans from visiting Cuba have been put in place for decades” (Bolender 2019: 13).

America's embrace. The media's role has been foremost to propagandize the revolution in the most negative forms, resulting in the normalization of the demonization of the Cuban revolution and its supporters. Media has led the inexorable march toward creating a critical narrative that does not stand up to honest scrutiny. Misinformation has been responsible for the preponderance of negative myths about Cuba.

According to Maranges (2022c), "mainstream media has worked overtime to display Cubans as unhappy people suffering the consequences of a 'failed' social and political project, while they deliberately hide the causes of these problems." This function of mass media, of course, contradicts Michel's (2021) optimistic account that "investigative journalism is a key tool in the fight against disinformation and influence operations. Investigative journalists ... serv[e] as the 'white blood cells' within the democratic body politic that hunt disinformation networks and counter their negative impact" (see also more general critique of mass media's role in Herman & Chomsky 1988). Nevertheless, in the case of coverage of Cuba, in addition to purveying misinformation, using mainly biased sources, and omitting fuller, contextualised accounts, mass media have employed a double standard.²⁶ The latter is illustrated by the fact that although in recent months "protests against scarcity ... erupted ... [in many countries] in Latin America[, they] rarely merited notice in the US news media – until they happened in Cuba" (Chomsky 2021) – a topic that we will explore more fully in the following section.

Bolender (2019: 12) identifies some of the mass media outlets that participate in the demonisation of Cuba:

The *Washington Times* remains the most stringent proponent of right-wing ideology, while Fox News is basically the media arm of the Republican Party. The two are consistently negative in their coverage of Cuba. But even the most recognized of the left-leaning national newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*, reliably show an anti-Cuba partiality, as do the television networks that claim to represent the middle ground in the political spectrum – MSNBC, CBS and CNN. All reveal the same disregard, with varying degrees, toward recognizing America's historical imperial designs on Cuba and the realities of revolutionary society.

26 "The ideal of a free press is increasingly harder to accept when ownership is continually reduced to a handful of conglomerates all in lockstep with most government policies, particularly when it comes to foreign relations; even to the point of the American press' acquiescence to government requests to suppress stories for the sake of ill-defined national security concerns" (Bolender 2019: 19).

The correspondence between US policy toward Cuba and the type of coverage provided by mass media derives in part from the political and, sometimes, ideological alignment of political and economic elites in the US. However, Bolender (2019: 136) explains that the correspondence also appears to result from more direct monetary interventions by the US government:

[J]ournalists in Miami were alleged to have accepted payment to write damaging reports leading up to the trial of the Cuban Five,²⁷ including *Miami Herald/Nuevo Herald* reporters Pablo Alfonso receiving \$58,000 and Wilfredo Cancio Isla \$20,000. It was indicated these journalists and others in the media had been on government payrolls to promote antirevolutionary propaganda, one example cited in a story by Cancio claiming Cuba used drugs to train its spies.

Whitney (2022), in his online article titled “US government pays big money for bad news about Cuba,” presents further details:

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is one of two big US paymasters. ... The projects funded by the NED are similar to those formerly undertaken by the CIA. ... The ... *Granma* newspaper on Jan. 18, 2022 presented a list published on the NED website on Feb. 23, 2021. ... The list includes 42 groups; the total amount dispensed was \$5,077,788.

The State Department’s US Agency for International Development (USAID) is another paymaster. On Oct. 23, 2021, journalist Tracey Eaton’s “Cuba Money Project” website reported on disbursements USAID announced during the previous month. The total being delivered to 12 organizations was \$6,669,000.

Bolender (2019) provides many illustrations of mass media’s role in distorting portraits of Cuba in ways that reinforce the tenor of US government policies toward that nation. Importantly, Bolender (2019: 31) calls attention to the

27 Bolender (2019: 4) explains that “after five Cuban intelligence agents were sent to infiltrate ... anti-revolutionary groups based in South Florida to try and prevent future acts of terrorism, the only reaction from the press was condemning the Cuban Five as spies deserving of their unjustly long sentence [by US courts. Furthermore,] it was revealed that a number of high-profile journalists from the *Miami Herald* and the Spanish-language version *Nuevo Herald* were paid by the US government to write damaging reports leading up to the trial, while at the same time conducting anti-Cuban propaganda on Miami-based Radio [and] Television Martí” (see also Kimber 2013).

longer history of such coverage of Cuba, beginning decades before the Triumph of its Revolution in 1959:

Historically the media's coverage of Cuba has been able to easily traverse the widest range of narratives based on shifting state necessities. When Cuba was fighting against Spanish colonialism [1895–1898], it was the media that created an image of a helpless native unable to gain independence due to incompetence, immaturity or ignorance. America had to step in. When it did, the press then informed the public the Cubans were happy, subservient and indebted to the USA for achieving what they could not. ... When the [1959] revolutionaries told the Americans to leave, it was the media that led the outrage – comforting the reader that the USA had done nothing wrong, that Fidel Castro and his lot were mentally unhinged, ingrates that turned against their benefactors with no justification. And then worst of all – they became communists.²⁸

Bolender (2019) also describes how “independent,” corporate, mass media (mis)informed readers and viewers about other, more recent events in Cuba:²⁹

There was virtually no news of Havana's constant complaints to Washington to prevent the illegal overflights of Florida-based Brothers to the Rescue (BTTR) during the rafter crises of 1996.³⁰ When Cuba took action and shot down two

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- 28 Bolender (2019: 48) illustrates his point by reporting that “two famous newspapers battled for supremacy as to which one would best shape public misinformation. The *New York Journal* owned by William Randolph Hearst and his competitor Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* deliberately urged their country into war in large part based on their jingoistic exploitation of the conflict, the most memorable incident being the hyper-aggressive fabrications following the explosion of the battleship USS Maine in Havana harbor”, which was allegedly blown up by the Spanish and the incident used as the rationale for the US sending troops to Cuba when Cubans had basically defeated Spain.
- 29 Bolender (2019: 48) clarifies that “the media has the absolute legitimacy to criticize; but it does not have the right to present a consistently partisan viewpoint with little regard to context, background or balance ... [which] has led to the misinformation so prevalent regarding Cuba's revolution”.
- 30 The 1994 Cuban rafter crisis or raft exodus involved 35,000+ Cubans trying to emigrate to the US via small boats and makeshift rafts. In the context of “rioting” in Cuba, sparked by the economic crisis following the dissolution of the USSR, the Cuban government announced that no one would be prevented from migrating. However, the US government stated that all rafters captured at sea would be detained at the US naval base in Guantánamo (Taylor 2014). A similar mass exodus, which was known as the Mariel boatlift, took place in 1980 (Larzelere 1988).

small aircrafts after more than a dozen incursions over national airspace, the only reporting would lead one to believe it was an unprovoked attack based on a single incident.³¹ (p. 4)

Coverage of the Cuban dissidents' arrests in 2003 lacked information regarding their accepting funds and aid from the USA in violation of international laws of diplomacy, nor was there any recognition of Cuba's right to arrest nationals working in support of America's hostile policies. (p. 28)

When US contractor Alan Gross was detained [in 2009] for bringing ... illegal military grade, high-tech communication equipment [into Cuba], the mainstream media simply denounced the arrest as proof of Cuba's anti-American rigidity. Little was said of Gross knowing he was aware what he was doing was illegal, lied about it being for Havana's Jewish community, and then admitted he was being paid by USAID ... The media, with a few noticeable exceptions, tried to diminish the crime by dutifully, and incorrectly, reporting that Gross was just conveying "cellphones" into Cuba, and that the arrest was completely arbitrary. (p. 45)

A fact-free article was rapidly turned into accepted evidence in 2015 with a report on Cuban military in Syria. Both Fox News and *Daily Beast* claimed hundreds of Cuban military personnel were assisting Bashar al-Assad in the country's civil war. The report was substantial in details and expert opinion. The only thing lacking was evidence. That didn't stop the lie from spreading across both traditional and social media ... (p. 6)

Finally, we should mention the US government and mainstream corporate media's allegations regarding the so-called "Havana Syndrome," which was said to have injured US (and Canadian) personnel in 2016–17. While the evidence of the "sonic attacks" was disputed and the Cuban government's role was never proved, the syndrome was one of the main rationales that President Trump used to dramatically reduce staff at the US Embassy in Havana and the Cuban

31 In 1996, two planes flown by Brothers to the Rescue, a Miami-based group of Cuban exiles founded in May 1991, were shot down by Cuban Air Force fighter planes. While the US government and much corporate media claimed the planes were in international airspace, the Cubans stated that the planes were in Cuban airspace and that they had previously complained about such flights. This incident motivated the passage of the Helms-Burton (Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity) Act, which President Clinton signed into law that year (Bolender 2019).

Embassy in the US (Bolender 2019; LeoGrande 2021). However, as Garcia (2022b) reported in January 2022:

On Thursday, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) admitted that its allegations against Cuba for the so-called “health incidents” against its diplomats in Havana back in 2016 were not caused by “a deliberate attack.” A report released by the CIA on the events confirms what the scientific community in Cuba and the rest of the world has said to exhaustion, “There is no evidence that an attack of such magnitude was planned by a government.” ... The information dismisses the “attacks” being perpetrated by Russia or other enemy foreign powers, as US politicians have tried to make them seem during the last five years.

Social Media as Vehicle to Promote Anti-Government Sentiments and Actions

US government “regime-change” funding has focused on using social media as well as broadcasting its own radio/TV programming and supporting mainstream, corporate media outlets (ACERE 2021a; Whitney 2022).³² Below we will discuss how social media was used to encourage, organise and publicise anti-government protests in 2021, but it is important to note that there is a longer history of such social media-focused efforts by the US government.³³

32 Sánchez (2022a) provides some background on the social media efforts: “On April 15, 2009, Jonathan Farrar, then head of US diplomatic corps in Cuba, wrote a cable that in 2011 would be declassified by Wikileaks. In it, the counterrevolution that Washington had been cultivating on the island since the mid-eighties of the twentieth century, with millionaire funding, international tours and international media resonance, was exposed as corrupt, divided, and lacking in program and popular scope. ... Against this backdrop, Farrar proposed a ‘new generation of ‘non-traditional dissidents’” made up of ‘bloggers, musicians and visual artists, (who) do not belong to dissident organizations’ who, he said, adopted ‘much better the high-impact rebel positions.’”

33 Alfonso (2021: 387) cautions us to consider the nature of “independent media” in Cuba as being “complex,” noting that “not all independent media outlets are funded by the US government”. However, Gómez Sánchez (2021) recounts that between 2014 and 2019 the Open Society and some US entities financed “what they called the *Cuba Possible Ideas Lab*, a website ... structured as ‘programs’ that revolve around certain themes, which seeks to draw in Cuban intellectuals that are interested in historical, legislative, or diplomatic issues [as well as] ... people interested in such social causes as racism, feminism, gender equality, sexual rights, and the protection of animals”. After this initiative ended, many of the key actors joined other efforts to promote protest and dissent against the Cuban government.

Macleod (2021b) recounts the history of ZunZuneo, “a Twitter-like app launched in 2010 ... [which] quickly gained a wide following in Cuba, attracting 55,000 people by 2012”:

However, at the height of its popularity, [ZunZuneo] was abruptly shut down. Unknown to either the Cuban government or its public was that the app had actually been commissioned and paid for by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Washington’s regime-change front group. The US government’s plan was to first capture the Cuban market and gain the trust of the people, then to slowly drip-feed users anti-communist messaging, making it appear as if there was a groundswell of resentment. Then, one day, users would be alerted that a huge protest was happening and that they should all attend. ... An *Associated Press* investigation later found that the NED chose to pull the entire project rather than risk being caught in the act. (Macleod 2021b)

Moreover, Blumenthal (2021) discusses related initiatives funded by USAID during the Obama administration:

In 2009, USAID initiated a program to spark a youth movement against Cuba’s government by cultivating and promoting local hip-hop artists. ... USAID outsourced the operation to Creative Associates International,³⁴ a Washington DC-based firm ... Creative Associates found its point man in Rajko Bozic ... Posing as a music promoter, Bozic approached a Cuban rap group called Los Aldeanos that was known for its ferociously anti-government anthem, “Rap is War.” The Serbian operative [i.e. Bozic] never told Los Aldeanos he was a US intelligence asset; instead, he claimed he was a marketing professional and promised to turn the group’s frontman into an international star. To further the plan, Creative Associates rolled out ZunZuneo, a Twitter-style social media platform that blasted out thousands of automated messages promoting Los Aldeanos to Cuban youth without the rap group’s knowledge. ... [However,] Cuban intelligence discovered contracts linking Bozic to USAID and rolled up the operation.³⁵

34 As explained by Elizalde (2021b), “in September 2021, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) gave \$6,669,000 in grants for projects aimed at “regime change” in Cuba ... In the last year, at least 54 organizations have benefited from the State Department, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and USAID programs for Cuba. In the last 20 years, this agency has given Creative Associates International ... more than \$1.8 billion for espionage, propaganda and the recruitment of agents of ‘change’ including on the island.”

35 Blumenthal (2021) notes that “a 2009 paper in the *Journal of Democracy*, the official organ of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), outlined an ambitious blueprint for cultivating Cuba’s post-Cold War underclass as an anti-government

Protests on 11 July 2021

Moving now to the situation in 2021, on 11 July, several hundred Cubans, including artists and musicians, engaged in protests, sometimes involving violence and property destruction, in different cities across Cuba (Elizalde 2022).³⁶ These protests were reported in US corporate media as being spontaneous.³⁷

vanguard. ‘Using the principles of democracy and human rights to unite and mobilize this vast, dispossessed majority in the face of a highly repressive regime is the key to peaceful change,’ wrote Carl Gershman and Orlando Gutierrez. ... [They also] advised a strategy that encouraged ‘non-cooperation’ with Cuba’s revolutionary institutions among those they described as ‘desocialized’ and marginal youth – ‘the dropouts, the jobless young people who make up nearly three-quarters of Cuba’s unemployed, and those who are drawn to drugs, crime, and prostitution.’ The two regime change specialists pointed to music and online media as ideal vehicles for harnessing the frustrations of Cuban youth.”

- 36 Yaffe (2021) explains that “on 11 July, I was in Havana, watching the Euro finals at a Cuban home when the broadcast was interrupted by an announcement from the president, Miguel Díaz-Canel. He had been to San Antonio de los Baños, on the outskirts of the capital, where a protest had turned into a riot, with shops looted, police cars overturned, and rocks thrown. Simultaneous protests had taken place in dozens of locations around the island. In Matanzas, where Covid-19 cases have soared, there was extensive destruction” (see also Nicoll 2021). The violent nature of the protests resulted in some people being arrested (Garcia 2022c). However, Maranges (2022a) argues against these people being considered “political” prisoners, as the US government claims, in part, because “the oversized number of 600 political prisoners comes from a Spain-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called the ‘Cuban Observatory of Human Rights,’ [which annually has] receive[d] thousands of dollars from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) ... [Additionally,] It is worth noting that many of these so-called political prisoners were involved in acts of vandalism against public property ... [Moreover,] the US has no moral high ground to accuse anyone, even less Cuba, of holding political prisoners. A 2018 report by National Jericho Movement concluded there were at least 523 political prisoners in the prisons of the US” (see also Maranges 2022b).
- 37 Carlos Fernández de Cossío, head of the Cuban Foreign Ministry’s Department for US affairs, calls attention to “the lies by the US government and capitalist media internationally, which claimed a massive anti-government ‘uprising’ swept the island that day. ‘The image presented by the international media is one of days or weeks of protests. That’s not true. They were on one day, July 11. The [protests] happened in 11 towns and cities. They were not massive demonstrations. In fact, the largest numbers in the streets were people who came out to support the revolution.’ The capitalist media ‘broadcast old photos of big demonstrations in Alexandria, Egypt, or in Buenos Aires, and presented them as if they were pictures taken in Cuba that day. Or they broadcast photos of pro-revolution demonstrations in Havana, claiming they were scenes of counterrevolutionary protests in Cuba!’” (reported by Koppel et al. 2021).

However, although certainly Cubans were suffering economically,³⁸ due in large part to the embargo as well as the COVID-19 pandemic (Blumenthal 2021; Karo 2022; Koppel et al. 2021; La Tizza Collective 2022; Nahem 2022), the protesters' discourse, articulated by the "San Isidro Movement,"³⁹ emphasised critique of Cuba's political system and calls for regime change.⁴⁰ The strong focus on the political dimension (regime change) may be because "the State Department, the US Agency for International Development, and the US Agency for Global Media have all financed programs to support Cuban artists, journalists, bloggers and musicians" (Macleod 2020a; see also Blumenthal 2021; Eaton 2021; Macleod 2020b). Yaffe (2021) discusses the immediate historical context of the 11 July protests:

Another key tool in recent years has been social media. In 2018, Trump set up an internet taskforce to promote "the free and unregulated flow of information" to Cuba, just as the country expanded facilities enabling Cubans to access the internet via their phones. During this summer, the social media campaign, which sees Miami-based influencers and YouTubers encourage Cubans on the island to

38 Yaffe (2021) notes that "the violent protests that erupted in Cuba in early July [2021] were the first serious social disturbances since the 'Maleconazo' of 1994, 27 years ago. Both these periods were characterised by deep economic crises" (see also Blumenthal 2021; Koppel et al. 2021).

39 Macleod (2021b) observes that the San Isidro Movement, which "painted[ed] itself as a grassroots collective of artists fighting for freedom of expression, ... has become a key weapon in the US government's assault on the Cuban revolution. ... Yotuel held a Zoom call with State Department officials to discuss 'Patria y Vida,' the anti-communist rap anthem he helped author. As the dust clears from a day of protests across Cuban cities, the *Wall Street Journal* has dubbed 'Patria y Vida' the 'common rallying cry' of opponents of Cuba's government, while *Rolling Stone* touted it as 'the anthem of Cuba's protests.' Besides Yotuel, two rappers who collaborated on the song are among a collection of artists, musicians and writers called the San Isidro Movement." Moreover, Blumenthal (2021) further explains that "by basing itself in a largely Afro-Cuban area of Old Havana and working through mediums like hip-hop, San Isidro has also maneuvered to upend the racially progressive image Cuba's leftist government ... [L]eading members of the San Isidro Movement have raked in funding from regime change outfits like the National Endowment for Democracy and US Agency for International Development ..."

40 Karo (2022) reports on interviews with a variety of Cuban youth, residing in and out of the country, concerning their perceptions of the causes of the 11 July protests, evidencing a wide range of opinions.

take to the streets, was ratcheted up. As spontaneous and authentic as [the 11 July protests] may seem, behind it lies US funding and coordination.⁴¹

As noted above, the 11 July protests were catalysed “by pro-US social media prompts, with some Cuban citizens joining in for legitimate reasons in the context of the current system and not against it” (August 2022; see also Elizalde 2021a; Pichardo 2022). The operation made intensive use of robots, algorithms, and accounts recently created for the occasion ... [For example,] the first account that used the HT #SOSCuba ... posted more than a thousand tweets on July 10 and 11, with automation of 5 retweets per second” (Pillager 2021; see also Garcia and Maranges 2021a). As Macleod (2021b) explains:

The group, La Villa del Humor, is widely credited with providing the initial spark that ignited nationwide protests on the Caribbean island ... [on 11 July], the most significant demonstrations since the 1990s. ... News and images of the demonstrations were immediately signal-boosted by individuals and groups in the United States, including the large and vocal Cuban ex-pat community in Miami, politicians, celebrities, and even US government officials, to the point where even President Joe Biden put out an official statement endorsing events.

It should be noted that the number of pro-government or pro-Revolution supporters who went out into the streets during this time was substantially larger than those protesting against the government (Betto 2021; Resumen Latinoamericano Staff 2021). Yaffe (2021) reports what some US-based media criticised, that in a Cuban television broadcast discussing the 11 July protests, President Miguel Díaz-Canel “ended the broadcast by calling for revolutionaries to take to the streets. Thousands of Cubans answered his call.” While I believe the president’s encouragement was important, I have some anecdotal evidence that at least some Cubans were already geared up to demonstrate in support of the government and the Revolution on 11 July. During my trip to Cuba in April–May 2022 – to attend the May Day Parade, the International Solidarity Meeting

41 According to Blumenthal (2021): “The NED and USAID exploited the opening [of internet access on the island] to build a potent online anti-government media apparatus. The new batch of US-backed outlets like CubaNet, CiberCuba and ADN Cuba represented an echo chamber of toxic insurrectionism ... As Cuban access to anti-government media grew, the Trump administration increased NED’s budget by 22% in 2018. ... [One] NED grant budgeted funds to ‘promote the inclusion of marginalized populations in Cuban society and to strengthen a network of on-island partners,’ implying the targeting of Afro-Cubans. The NED has placed a heavy emphasis on infiltrating Cuba’s hip-hop scene.”

and Guantánamo Seminar on Peace and Abolishing Foreign Military Bases – I spoke with four youth (18–24 years old) during a block party organised for our delegation by the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution in a town outside of the provincial capital of Artemisa on 30 April. I confirmed that they connected with social media and asked whether they had seen messages prior to 11 July calling for people to engage in anti-government demonstrations. They told me that they had, but, for them, these messages had the opposite effect – they rejected such calls and instead organised a pro-government (or, as they called it, pro-Revolution) demonstration in their town.

Projected Protests on 15 November

Following the perceived “success” of the 11 July protests,⁴² some Cubans on the island and, perhaps more so, members of the Cuban exile community decided to organise “two new actions: a planned general strike in October and a larger set of nationwide demonstrations for November [2021]” (Macleod 2021b). They specifically made use of a recently established Facebook group named Archipiélago (August 2022). According to LeoGrande (2021):

In September [2021], a group of Cuban artists and intellectuals calling themselves the Archipelago Project joined with traditional dissidents to call for nationwide “Marches for Change” on November 20, later moved to November 15,⁴³ the day Cuba [was] scheduled to reopen its tourist industry [and have students return in-person to school]. The government responded to this challenge by declaring the proposed marches illegal and threatening criminal charges against the organizers. (See also de los Santos & Prashad 2021a.)

42 Macleod (2021a) observes that “the protests in July were the largest and most significant on the island since the 1990s. However, although they garnered widespread media attention and the support of celebrities, politicians, and even the president of the United States, they quickly fizzled out.”

43 According to de los Santos and Prashad (2021a): “On October 9, the US Embassy in Havana issued a statement that criticized the Cuban government’s decision ‘to hold military exercises throughout the country on November 18 and 19, ending on November 20 with National Defense Day,’ calling it ‘a blatant attempt to intimidate Cubans.’ The Cuban government holds this regular exercise to prepare its 11 million citizens for multiple scenarios that range from a possible US invasion to natural disasters. Normally military personnel, the civil defense forces, and members of the general population participate. To counter this announcement, Archipiélago announced on its Facebook page that the march would now be moved to November 15 (from November 20), the day Cuban authorities are expected to open its border to tourism.”

Macleod (2021b) further explains:

An announcement shared on social media (including on La Villa del Humor) state[d] that organizations across the country are gearing up for a [general] strike [on 10 October], with hashtags like #ParoNacionalCuba and #SOSCuba trending. ... It is, however, the actions scheduled for November 20 that appear to be generating more excitement in the community. Marches across the island are planned, including in Guantánamo, Holguín, Camaguey and Havana ... The movement is being outwardly advertised as a “peaceful⁴⁴ march in favor of human rights and against violence,” and already has a who’s who of US-backed figures, such as the San Isidro Movement rap group and politician Manuel Cuesta Morúa signed on.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Maranges (2021) reports that the November action

was announced on September 21, after a group of 15 people delivered an authorization request for a march to the Old Havana’s city hall, something that was [to be] replicated in over 5 Cuban provinces. ... The march proposal came from a Facebook group named “Archipelago” whose main voice is the theater screenplay writer Yunior García [Aguilera], who is very well-known for openly criticizing the government through his plays ... On October 12, all requests were denied by the local governments arguing that the march was part of a regime

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- 44 Based on his analysis of postings on the Facebook group, August (2022) raises questions about the organizers’ plans for a “peaceful” action: “Despite what they profess, Archipiélago is far from being a peaceful organization. This Facebook group of supposed ‘pacifists’ features a riot in which a vehicle was overturned. Even more explicitly, they ask below, ‘If violence is not the way to demand justice ... why is it the way to establish “order”?’ ... [Additionally,] during the course of a special edition of the popular Cuban TV program, *Mesa Redonda*, Rogelio Polanco Fuentes, the head of the Ideological Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, released a recording of a telephone conversation between Ramón Saúl Sánchez [a known violent terrorist] and Archipiélago coordinator Yunior García Aguilera.”
- 45 August (2022) mentions that on a broadcast of the popular Cuban *Mesa Redonda*, Carlos Fernández de Cossío, the head of the Ideological Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, “revealed that two Cuban citizens are part of the generous beneficiaries of the funds of these US organizations [USAID and NED]: Manuel Cuesta Morúa and Yunior García Aguilera, signatories of the documents delivered to the Cuban authorities regarding the intention to carry out marches in various cities of the country” in November 2021.

change strategy, which is clearly stated as illegal in the Cuban Constitution. (See also de los Santos & Prashad 2021b; Lonas 2021; Telesur Staff 2021a.)⁴⁶

Despite the flurry of social media posts and public statements, however, “almost nothing came of the much anticipated and internet-hyped protests in Cuba on November 15th” (de los Santos & Prashad 2022; see also McAuliff 2021; Nahem 2022). As Bruno Rodriguez, Cuban Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated soon thereafter:

The expectations of those abroad were not fulfilled. They stayed dressed for that party that never happened ... The script of this piece was not good, and the staging was worse ... November 15 will not be remembered for violent uprisings, but rather for a world party demanding justice and respect to be done. (Reported in Garcia & Maranges 2021a.)

Benjamin (2021) comments:

Dissidents on the island, with their US backers, had been working feverishly for months to turn the unprecedented July 11 protests into a crescendo of government opposition on November 15. They built a formidable structure, with sophisticated social media (including an abundance of fake news), piles of cash from Cuban Americans and the US government, and declarations of support from a bipartisan Congress and all the way up to the White House. Even after the Cuban government denied the protesters a permit on the grounds that they were part of a destabilization campaign led by the United States, anti-government forces insisted that they were undeterred and were ready to take the risks. But in the end, their Field of Dreams⁴⁷ turned out to be an illusion.

Benjamin (2021) answers his own question of why 15 November was a non-event:

46 Moreover, as de los Santos and Prashad (2021b) indicate, when “the Cuban government denied permission to Archipiélago to hold the march on November 15 ..., the State Department published a statement that condemned the Cuban government’s decision to ‘deny permission for peaceful protests.’ State Department spokesperson Ned Price tweeted on October 16 about the US support for ‘peaceful assembly’ by the Cuban people, which was retweeted by the US Embassy in Havana on the same day” (see also Elizalde 2021c).

47 This is a reference Benjamin (2021) earlier made to the film by that title in which Kevin Costner, referencing a baseball field, suggested that “if you build it, they will come”.

Intimidation of dissidents was certainly a key factor. The leader of the Facebook group Archipelago, Yunior Garcia, was kept under virtual house arrest. Other leaders were threatened with arrest and repudiated by their pro-revolution neighbors. But at the grassroots, I talked to Cubans who had second thoughts about the usefulness of street protests. They had come into the streets on July 11, spontaneously, with all kinds of legitimate gripes: the scarcity of food and medicines, the long lines for basic goods, the rapid spread of COVID, the hard currency stores they didn't have access to. But in the intervening months between the July protests and November, many realized that street protests only created division when the country needed unity. They realized that despite all the social media hype, the government was not about to fall, and that even if it did, there was no telling what would follow ... People were also turned off by the choice of the day, November 15, which was timed to wreak havoc on precisely the day of Cuba's planned reopening ... for tourism ... [and] schools ...

He also observed in Havana public actions by groups who supported the Cuban revolution and government:

The weekend before the planned protest, a new group of revolutionary youth called Pañuelos Rojos, or Red Scarves, set up a 48-hour encampment with music, theater, games and group discussions. On the last day of the encampment, there was a concert. The young people were sitting on the floor, grooving to the music of the musician Tony Avila, when the Cuban president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, showed up. The students cheered as he sat down on the cement floor with them. Avila was in the middle of a song called *Mi Casa* (My House). ... Everyone was singing with him, and the president's head was nodding up and down. The crowd roared when it came to this verse: "Although I'm happy in my house, there are changes that must be made. But I won't go too fast, because I don't want to damage the foundation." (Benjamin 2021)

Conclusion

In the introduction I argued that the concept of peace is broader than the absence of war, in that one needs to consider other forms of violence besides macro-level physical or direct violence (e.g. international military engagement), such as micro-level physical violence and macro-level structural or indirect violence within countries. However, in this article I have tried to demonstrate that countries can engage in structural violence (i.e. policies and practices that create or perpetuate poverty, ill health, and shortened life span) against other countries. I examined this phenomenon in the context of US–Cuba relations, specifically

looking at the roles of *economic war* (i.e. sanctions or unilateral coercive measures) and *media war* (i.e. US's support for propaganda communicated through its own organised mass media and the supposedly “independent,” corporate mass media as well as via social media to instigate anti-government sentiment and action). I argued the importance of the Cuban case, given the 60+-year history of US government hostile actions toward Cuba.

I reviewed the US's economic war against Cuba, which began soon after Cuba's 1959 revolution, although the US's hostile actions as well as desires and efforts to shape Cuban society go back to the 19th century. I also documented the impact on the economy and daily life of Cubans of the evolving set of sanctions or unilateral coercive measures, summarised under the umbrella of the embargo or blockade.

In terms of the media war, I focused on how propaganda distributed through mass, corporate media as well as social media, often paid for by the US government, was directed at misleading Cubans and others, including Americans, about the situation in Cuba. Such distortions were designed to provoke alienation and anti-government action by Cubans in general and, in more recent years, particular subgroups of artists, musicians, Afro-Cubans, and youth. While some successes can be noted (specifically the sparking and broadcasting of protests on 11 July 2021), more generally the media war has failed in its goal of regime change. The non-event of 15 November 2021 is a clear example of this.

That the US has devoted significant financial and human resources to undertake the economic and media war against Cuba should be noted (see Rodríguez Milán 2022), particularly in connection with the many socioeconomic needs – in the US, in Cuba and in the rest of the world – that could have been addressed with those resources. Thus, the US's “war” against Cuba must be understood not only in terms of its violation of international law and its violation of Cuba's sovereignty, but also as a waste of resources that could have improved the lives of various people.

Nevertheless, the US's economic and media war continues to be waged. We should note that the Biden Administration, despite a campaign promise to cancel Trump's executive orders, did not undertake any positive actions toward Cuba until May 2022 (Garcia 2022a). Thus, in mid-December 2021, “some 114 members of Congress sent a forceful letter⁴⁸ to President Joe Biden calling for ‘immediate humanitarian actions’ to lift the economic sanctions ‘that prevent food, medicine, and other humanitarian assistance from reaching the Cuban people’” (Kornbluh 2022; see also ACERE 2021b). However, as of writing,

48 Letter is available at: <https://mcgovern.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=398780>.

President Biden has not even agreed to meet with these members of his own (Democratic) party.

The limited measures regarding Cuba that the Biden Administration announced on 16 May 2022 involved “areas of visas, regular migration, flights to the provinces, remittances and adjustments to regulations for transactions with the non-state sector” (MINREX 2022; see also Sánchez 2022b; Washington Post Editors 2022). However, these measures do not end the blockade, eliminate the travel bans on Americans, or remove Cuba from the State Department’s list of countries that allegedly sponsor terrorism (ACERE 2022; MINREX 2022; Waters et al. 2022).⁴⁹

Moreover, during the same period the Biden Administration indicated that Cuba (as well as Nicaragua and Venezuela) would not be invited to the Summit of the Americas, organised by the Organisation of American States and scheduled to take place 6–10 June in Los Angeles (Liston 2022; Maranges 2022d; Oramas León 2022).⁵⁰ And it did not alter this exclusion despite a cacophony of protests and threats not to attend by various Latin American and Caribbean heads of state (Benjamin 2022; Clark-Gollub et al. 2022; Garcia 2022d; Guerra Cabrera 2022a, 2022b; Lawrence 2022; Perry 2022; Tricontinental 2022). To counter the OAS’s Summit of the Americas, two summits were organised to include all countries in the Americas. The first was the People’s Summit for Democracy (8–10 June in Los Angeles, California, organised by the ANSWER Coalition, Code Pink and other groups) (Garcia & Hackwell 2022; Granados Ceja 2022; People’s Summit Media Team 2022; Sterling 2022). The second was the Workers’ Summit of the Americas (10–12 in Tijuana, Mexico, organised by the Alliance for Global Justice, Central de Trabajadores de Cuba, Central Bolivariana Socialista de Trabajadores, Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación de Baja California and Task Force on the Americas, among other groups) (Harris 2022; Workers’ Summit of the Americas 2022).

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49 Moreover, as Rodríguez (2022) notes, “Cuban authorities [reported] they have intercepted more than a dozen speedboats arriving from the United States this year – including two shooting incidents and at least one death.”

50 As explained by Tricontinental (2022), the Organization of American States (OAS), created in 1948, “has been used as a tool to fight against communism in the hemisphere and to impose a US agenda on the countries of the Americas. ... In 1962, ... Cuba – a founding member of the OAS – was expelled from the organisation. ... In response, Fidel Castro called the OAS the ‘US Ministry of Colonies.’”

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